



Book Review: Inclusive Education: Stories of Success and Hope in a Canadian Context

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Abstract:

In their book, *Inclusive Education: Stories of Success and Hope in a Canadian Context* (2018), Stegemann and AuCoin have created an exceptional collection of case studies that illustrate what is possible when a firm belief in inclusion in its deepest sense is combined with a spirit of collaboration and co-operation. The nine case studies include students with unique and complex learning needs at different stages of their educational career. A wide range of exceptionalities and levels of ability are presented in different settings across Canada. While this diversity makes the book interesting and informative, it is the inclusion of multiple perspectives and the actual voices of the individuals involved that results in a compelling and important resource for both pre-service and in-service educators.

Keywords: inclusive education; case studies; Universal Design for Learning (UDL); Response to Intervention (RtI)

Book Review

Stegemann, K. C., & AuCoin, A. (2018). *Inclusive education: Stories of success and hope in a Canadian context*. Toronto, ON: Pearson Education Canada

In their book, *Inclusive Education: Stories of Success and Hope in a Canadian Context* (2018), Drs. Stegemann and AuCoin have created an exceptional collection of case studies that illustrate what is possible when a firm belief in inclusion in its deepest sense is combined with a spirit of collaboration and co-operation. The nine case studies (three of which are also available in French) include students with unique and complex learning needs at different stages of their educational career. A wide range of exceptionalities and levels of ability are presented in different settings across Canada. While this diversity makes the book interesting and informative, it is the inclusion of multiple perspectives and the actual voices of the individuals involved that results in a compelling and important resource for both pre-service and in-service educators.

The book can be divided into three main sections: introductory chapters that provide background information, the case studies themselves, and final chapters that synthesize and consolidate the ideas presented in the case studies. The value of the text as a learning tool comes not only from the cases themselves but in their presentation and supporting features.

Case studies used for teaching often, I find, present a dilemma with no clear answer: they are used for discussion and to promote critical thinking. This book, however, focuses on success stories by illustrating what is possible when there is a teamwork approach with the goal of breaking down barriers. While focusing on dilemmas can promote useful dialogue it can also be somewhat demoralizing. The hope offered by these stories can counter that negativity. In the authors' words: "Much has been written about the problems and challenges associated with inclusive education: this text will take a different perspective. Rather than focusing on what is not working, each case study in this text will highlight how each member of the education team works together to create a successful inclusive experience" (p. xxi). The goal is to provide "hope and a path to enhanced educational opportunities in the future" (p. xxii).

An important feature of the text is that the cases depict real people and situations; they therefore illustrate the messiness and complexity of life in educational settings across Canada. Although each province and territory in Canada is responsible for education policy, resulting in a range of practices, there are many similarities throughout the various jurisdictions. The cases represent the diversity that is Canada, but also goals and ideals that are shared by Ministries of Education and educational institutions across the country.

Diversity is evident in many forms throughout the nine cases in the text. Although location is not a main feature of the cases, they do represent a range of geographical regions across Canada, from the west coast to the east, as well as northern and southern communities. Urban settings are included but some cases also depict the challenges of rural and remote locations, especially in terms of access to special services. While the text is in English, French language settings are included.

The students involved in the cases are also quite diverse. They range in age from six to twenty-three years old, although the details of their stories usually begin in early childhood. The wide range in age means that, collectively, the cases include the many stages and transitions in a child's academic career from preschool to post-secondary. The cases vary in terms of the level of functioning of the students and although four of the nine cases include a diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), many other medical conditions and exceptionalities are also featured. Most of the cases involve multiple diagnoses and difficulties and, as the authors indicate, unique learning needs that result in the complexity of the issues facing the students and their families. Given the unique and complex nature of each situation, the cases are not intended to provide examples of programming for specific exceptionalities. They do, however, "demonstrate the types of beliefs, attitudes, knowledge, and skills that are required in order to optimize the learning experiences of all children, and in particular those with unique learning needs" (p. xxi).

It is the multiple perspectives and voices that add richness and depth to the ideas being presented. They also serve to remind us that there are many people impacted by each student's story. These personal, lived experiences are sometimes forgotten or are under-represented when we focus on learning about exceptionalities. The case studies include stories from educational team members from both in-school and outside agencies, family members, as well as the students themselves.

Although these stories end on hopeful notes and illustrate how barriers can be reduced over time, they also show that the journey is often long and difficult. The voices of educational staff working directly with the students reveal the challenges that are sometimes faced in classrooms when there are students with exceptional needs. School administrators and other support staff show what can be done when a team is willing to work together towards the goal of creating classrooms that meet the needs of all students. However, some of the most poignant contributions come from the families of the students. Hank, the brother of Wilson, a young boy diagnosed with autism, talks about the fun he has with his older brother, but also admits it can be also be hard:

When it is bad, Wil follows me around everywhere and I cannot get any space. And he grabs or scratches me and it hurts. And sometimes he gets my parents in a bad mood and they take it out on me. Their attention is always on Wil. (p. 39)

The voices of the parents, too, are often raw in their honesty. One case study, centering on William, illustrates how complicated combined mental and physical health issues can be. While William's early years in school were very positive, this deteriorated rapidly when he developed symptoms of hearing impairment, autism spectrum disorder and mental illness (p. 74), and the reader is informed that his most recent diagnosis is bipolar disorder. William is currently "fairly healthy and pretty content" (p. 82) and lives in his own apartment with support from his parents, but William's mother reveals some the low points in their journey. She talks about the "shaming and blaming" related to mental illness and the feelings of despair at the inadequate support to deal with William's violence towards both himself and others.

Leon's mother also discusses the difficult emotions that often face parents when they realize their children will struggle in school. After Leon makes it clear that he does not want to attend French classes, where he been anxious and frustrated, she says, "That's when my vision of our future, especially academically, came crashing down" (p. 169). While Leon is still young and his progress in school has had ups and downs, the reader learns that he is now getting the support that allows him to be successful both academically and socially in school. In Leon's case, as in many others in the text, the benefits of inclusion to all students, not just those with exceptionalities, are evident. In the words of a parent of one of Leon's classmates, "Both my children are in inclusive classes, and this experience is allowing them to develop certain skills—patience, empathy, comprehension of different situations, comprehension and appreciation of differences, a feeling of safety in a crisis situation, etc." (p. 170).

As with the parents, the voices of the students reveal some frustration with their situations but also the positivity that comes when they feel successful. Drake, a student with attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and Tourette Syndrome, talks about wanting to hide when he feels embarrassed by teachers that draw too much attention to him but also about how he likes to go to school now because the teachers are nice to him and understand him better (p. 146).

Gabby also expresses her enjoyment of school. Gabby was born with athetoid cerebral palsy and doctors initially held little hope for her ability to function in any meaningful way. However, through the relentless efforts of her mother and with the support of dedicated medical and educational teams, Gabby will graduate from grade twelve alongside the same students with whom she began kindergarten. Gabby uses an augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) device as well as a variety of other technological aids, all of which she controls with her head. Gabby's essay, included in the text, reveals her positive personality and her appreciation for all of the support she has received. She is grateful to the individuals involved, but also for the Canadian programs and grants that have provided the technology that has allowed her to thrive and will make possible her dream of becoming a writer.

As with all the cases in the text, Gabby's is ultimately a story of hope and illustrates what can happen when everyone involved believes in inclusion. It must be recognized that in many of the cases the success is due in no small part to the fact that the parents involved had the knowledge and resources to ensure the best possible outcome for their child. William's parents paid for expensive behaviour therapy when he was young and eventually purchased a property that allowed them to provide an apartment for him. In Gabby's case, her mother admits that she was lucky to have a job that allowed her the flexibility to take Gabby to the many appointments she needed. However, in all of the cases, the efforts of many others were necessary to recognize and then reduce the barriers in order to lead to successful inclusion.

The cases are supported and extended through a number of different features including three introductory chapters that provide context and background information. Chapter one provides key definitions and explains the purposes and goals of the text. The authors chose the widely accepted definition of inclusion as adopted by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural

Organization (UNESCO) in 2005, noting the complex variety of definitions and implementation practices of inclusion across Canada. Specific elements that are part of this definition form recurring themes in the text, including the idea that inclusion is an ongoing process and that participation in an inclusive environment involves reducing barriers. To conclude the introductory chapter, in keeping with the theme of including voices found in the cases, the value and importance of inclusive education for all students is discussed by five individuals across Canada: a young man with a Mild Intellectual Disability (MID), a university professor, a high school teacher, an educational assistant, and a school superintendent. A main point presented by these individuals and supported by the UNESCO definition is that inclusion is a process. This theme is carried throughout the text.

Chapter 2 provides a brief history of the trends and societal views that have impacted individuals with exceptionalities. It outlines the evolution of special education with a focus on North America, outlining the legal and civil rights events that have influenced the current approach to the education of students with exceptionalities in Canada. In Chapter 3, two theoretical frameworks are presented which “incorporate research-based teaching strategies to effectively address the learning needs of exceptional learners” (p. 26). Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and Response to Intervention (RtI) are widely used in educational settings across the country and appear in the policy documents of most provinces and territories. The frameworks of UDL and RtI are used as a basis for commentaries after each case study. These commentaries are presented by “experts in the field of inclusive education” (p. 184) and add another perspective to the voices of those who were directly involved in the cases themselves.

The nine case studies are followed by the two final chapters of the text, which provide a synthesis and a direction for the future. In chapter thirteen both the case studies and the commentaries are consolidated and analysed for common themes. The most salient among these are the need for students with exceptionalities to have a social network both in and out of school, the importance of parents as advocates, the use of technology, and the need to establish classrooms that are equitable and inclusive both academically and socially. Administrative leadership also appeared to be a significant factor in many of the cases. The firm belief in and commitment to inclusion on the part of school and board level personnel contributed a great deal to the positive outcomes for the students. Then, in the final chapter, the authors discuss the future of inclusive education. While the focus is on the positive changes in legislation and public policy, there is the admission that there is still a great deal of work to be done to make schools and classrooms truly inclusive.

The text is a valuable educational tool that will certainly provide both pre- and in-service teachers with, as the authors hope, “a better understanding of both the philosophy and the practices associated with inclusive education” (p. 6). While each province is responsible for their own education system (leading to some variations in practice across the country), the similarities in practice make the text informative regardless of the jurisdiction. Elements of practice common to special education systems are illustrated through the voices of the individuals as well as the artifacts that support the cases. These include the typical team members involved, the assessment and

identification protocols, and the creation of specific education plans to meet the needs of the students.

Approaches and philosophies common to education systems across Canada are also represented in the case studies and discussed in the commentaries. While Universal Design and Response to Intervention are most widely discussed, the importance of collaboration with parents and respecting culture as part of education also are addressed. It is important to note here that the philosophies and ideas in the text are intended to apply to all teaching and learning environments. In the authors' words, "This reinforces the idea that inclusive education is NOT merely the merging of general and special education, but a completely new way of conceptualizing our classrooms so that barriers are reduced for each and every student" (p. 191). Discussion questions at the end of each chapter provide the opportunities for educators to gain a deeper understanding of both the practices and the philosophies.

Other elements that make the text useful for learning purposes include a list of topics covered and learning outcomes at the start of the chapters, "fast facts" about the exceptionalities and a list of key terms and useful websites for more information. The diversity represented in many senses means the text will resonate with a wide audience.

Much like the stories contained within, the success of this book is the result of a team effort with contributions from a wide range of authors and commentators. Stegemann and AuCoin are to be complimented on bringing together so many diverse perspectives and engaging case studies. The stories and discussions show that while Canada has made much progress in supporting the needs of students with exceptionalities there is still, as the authors repeat a number of times, much work to do. The process of inclusion is ongoing and is as much, if not more, about beliefs and attitudes as it is about skills and knowledge. It is the belief that inclusion is not only possible but necessary that is essential. The stories truly, as the authors intend, "provide hope and a path to enhanced educational opportunities in the future" (p. xxii) and the way forward "towards a more just and compassionate society that includes and celebrates personal diversity" (p. 3).